

i magazine
2002



i magazine 2002

i magazine is a student literary publication of
Mount Wachusett Community College, Gardner, Massachusetts

The crocus has a purpose
Like the robin has a song
To poke its head out of the ground
And tell us winter's gone

Table of Contents

September 11, 2001.	Ryan James
Hidden Memories.	Mike LeClair
Empty Handed.	Stephanie Young
Little Red Squirrel.	Tina Farnsworth
Unnamed.	Shannon Hard
Swinging Hearts.	Laurel Herget
Melting Snow.	Ben Bettez
The Transformation.	Michelle Cote
Marge Wilson.	Aaron Ufema
An Excerpt.	Jessica G. Favata
Blue.	Jacquie Carter
Down and Away (Stone Field, May 2, 1994)	Kevin Hadmack
Unnamed.	Shannon Hard
Complacent.	Andrew Melnicki
Nothing to Fear.	Thomas Meiners
Poem.	Melissa Jeltsen
Guinness.	Chris Chouinard
From <i>War Stories and Other Tales</i> : "Typhoon".	K A Tower
Poem.	Melissa Jeltsen
Brother's Gift: Part 1.	Denise Matte
Rise of Hope.	Cory Bailey
Wild Horses to Plastic.	Eileen Torri
Unnamed.	Shannon Hard
Tangleberry Web.	Aaron Ufema
Poem.	Matthew Richardson
A Dream?.	Brandi T LeBlanc
Only in Dreams.	Ben Bettez
Renaissance.	Jeanne Hue

Poem on frontispiece by Marianne Stoy
Cover drawing by Aaron Ufema

editorial staff

cory bailey

jacquie carter

chris chouinard

shannon hard

laurel herget

melissa jeltsen

denise matte

ken tower

aaron ufema

stephanie young

arthur marley, adviser

September 11, 2001

It had been a long day of work in the French mountainside. My brother, uncle, and I were winding down the treacherous roads from approximately 2000 meters high in the French Alps. It was the fourth day my brother and I were there. My entire family had departed for home earlier that day after a week of family reunion. My brother and I were to stay a year and pick up a little French culture. Today we had built a stonewall at my uncle's old chalet perched high in the green, cow-path-carved hills, just below the snow line. I was so happy to be in the French Alps, inhaling the fresh air and looking down the endless valleys. The turns were so drastic I hit my head on the window with every swerve of the road. My uncle had insisted that we listen to French music on the radio despite how ugly it sounded. Exhausted and content about the day's efforts, we descended.

Ten minutes from home two words jumped out of the radio: "New York." I understood, and that was all I understood. I tuned my ears to decipher the secret code language. I gave up almost instantly in frustration and turned to my uncle who had been concentrating on not rolling off the steep ledges, and into the town below.

"What did they just say about New York," I asked impatiently. I noticed a panicked look on his face that differed from his usual lackadaisical expression. The car was definitely picking up speed as I clenched the overhead handle. Georges was always calm, mellow, and happy.

"Someone just bombed New York," he said straight up, no beating around the bush.

"What?" My brother and I lunged into the radio trying desperately to understand the woman's frantic voice, rattling off the news. It sounded urgent. The tone came across in perfect English. Suddenly my uncle floored the gas pedal and moved forward in his seat as a tear rolled down his enormous French nose. Georges was the type of hard-core mountain man you would never expect to catch crying. With my eyes looking over the unguarded ledge of the road at an 85-degree angle and my ears concentrating on the radio, my senses were overwhelmed.

"What, what else," we demanded impatiently. There was obviously something more to make Georges' eyes stare as if the turns did not exist. His jaw was tight and his bottom lip quivered. He looked distraught with a strong hint of anger.

"A plane, a passenger plane, hit a building," he struggled to announce. Our hearts dropped into our stomachs. Our minds raced like a squirrel about to be hit by a speeding car. Our entire lives had left on a plane to New York six hours earlier--Mom, Dad, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. So many things raced through our heads, and hearts.

"Oh my god, Oh my god," my brother repeated as he rocked back and forwards, and his eyes glazed over. We were only five minutes from home and Georges hit ninety miles an hour as we whizzed through the middle of the pastry-shop-filled town. Finally Georges screeched into the drive. We were home and could get some solid information.

"Go, go," my uncle signaled to my brother and me, and we bolted up the three flights of stairs to the apartment. We opened the door to see my Aunt and cousin looking at us with tear-stricken, sobbing faces. We rushed up the small set of stairs to witness, on TV, a second plane smash into Tower Two. My brother dropped to his knees in front of the TV. I feared the worst. It was September 11, 2001.

Phone lines to America were dead. We stopped dialing numbers only for a second to watch the towers fall. No word from the family. For all we knew they were gone.

The phone rang. A voice muted by static.

"Can someone please tell us why the plane is turning around?" It was Dad.

~Ryan James

Hidden Memories

He stood against the backstop, his eyes squinting against the late-day sun off beyond the right field fence. Gazing out toward the vast, lush green grass, he did not know why he had come here today. It was just one of those unexplainable urges that he often got and needed to respond to. Had it been twenty years since he last set foot on this field? God, it felt like only yesterday he was out here in his brand new spikes shagging fly balls with the rest of his teammates, in the quickly fleeting afternoon sun. He remembered the struggle Coach had experienced to squeeze in just a few more batters before nightfall.

The thought of his ten-year-old rubber knees going out from under him when he faced his first ever curveball--compliments of his dad's tired arm and sore body after a long, hard day's work--filled the man's head and put a peaceful smile on his face. He was a man who long ago traded in his muddy size eights, sweatpants and sunflower seeds for a pair of penny loafers, a business suit and a pack of Nicorette gum. How he longed for the past. Days when his biggest concern wasn't a mortgage payment, a credit card statement or yet another check to be written for alimony; but instead hopping on your bike on a Friday afternoon and heading to the ballpark before the others so you could pick any position to play but right field, because you always knew that Little League never had a lefty that could pull. He wondered whatever happened to those guys over the years?

The trip down memory lane came to a screeching halt, thanks to the arrival of a beat up, baby-blue minivan pulling into the parking lot beside his BMW. After a few moments the dented, passenger-side doors swung open with a loud squeak and out popped four teenage boys, carrying with them their bats, gloves, baseballs and, of course, their hopes and dream. The dream that every youngster involved in the sport prays for, from T-Ball all the way up through the college ranks, the dream of maybe someday making it to the big leagues.

Following the boys towards the field was a very familiar sight, a middle-aged man clutching a large bag, loaded with catcher's gear

and a few gloves. The scene reminded him of when his dad would frequently join him for a trip to the ball field. Dad would lay it right down the middle so he could hit it, maybe to boost his boy's self-esteem or perhaps because of the ten-hour shift he had just finished at work. Man, he missed his dad. It had been three years last week since he had lost him.

Fighting back a tear he took this as his cue to leave. The man pulled himself from the fence behind home plate and started for the gate along the third base side. Halfway there he again suddenly had one of those unexplainable urges. Something deep inside of him refused to let him take another step. Instead he loosened up his tie and began to walk toward the father figure and his teenage crew on the first base line.

"Excuse me, guys?" he asked with a very noticeable sense of excitement in his voice. "Would you happen to have an extra glove?"

~Mike LeClair

Empty Handed

"What are we going here for?"

"To get some books."

"Where?"

"Here," Daniel let Sally through the sections of books; first to the history section, then to the fiction.

"You know how you asked me about Rebecca? Sarah barely acknowledges Daniel as her eyes gaze over the names of the authors. "I want to ask her out. I get all shy. What should I do?" Daniel looks down at the floor, then at a book.

Sarah turns from the bookshelf. "Well, call her and say, "Let's go on a date.""

He laughs, "You don't know what to do."

"No."

They both laugh quietly and leave empty handed.

~Stephanie Young

Little Red Squirrel

Yesterday, or was it the day before, I was thinking about you. Do you remember the day you and I sat atop that mountain? What was its name? I don't remember so well these days. It seems like it was a million years ago. Another lifetime. I was so happy that day. We hiked many miles, drank many beers, and contemplated how happy we would be if we could stay there forever, neither of us wanting to go back to the "real" world.

Do you remember how we laughed when that little red squirrel came running up to us? And you, "nature boy," jumped out of the way. I can still hear you saying, "Damn, it almost ran up my legs." I had tears running down my face, and my cheeks cramped up I laughed so hard.

Sometimes if I close my eyes, I can still feel the warm rays of the sun shining on my back, the cool ocean breeze gently blowing the hair into my face. I can smell the miles of trees that surrounded us; I never appreciated the smell of a pine until that day. We had many adventures that summer, you and I. I thought that we found something special, but I know now that our worlds are so different. (Maybe it was just the wrong time for us, or was it just the wrong time for me.)

So now, I keep the picture of that little red squirrel hanging in my bedroom. It helps me remember that not everyday is like today. Like I said, I don't remember so well these days, too much on my mind, it's hard to keep my thoughts straight sometime. There are times, like today, when I'm feeling really blue, I take that picture down from where it has hung for so long now, blow off the dust, and hold that picture close to my heart. I fall asleep, and in my dreams the smell of pine trees, ocean breezes and little red squirrels comfort me, and help me to remember.

~Tina Farnsworth

Running through the elaborate chain work of streets in the early dark, unbuttoned and cantering, shrieking through the night, destroying this, destroying myself and all of the landscape becoming scorched, smoldering in the aftermath, all level surfaces pitched and slanted in the yawning darkness. (It is as inevitable as that. I know the sequence and there is no denying it.)

Combing grass and lawn-wreckage out of my hair, creosote on my red shirt and a railroad spike through my spine.

Lying in the wet grass, singing like a miserable cricket. "All the Irish do that; get drunk and sing Black Betty all night." So she says, and so I sing.

Crazy from tequila, not just drunk, but insane as well, almost blind and even the clear autumn stars are invisible to me now, obscured by a howling mist that covers me as I lie here under the eyes of an impartial god.

~Shannon Hard

Swinging Hearts

The tree was old and faded; it forked near the bottom, and its large, fat branches hung over the water, over the banking, and over the smaller, younger trees. It seemed to grow into infinity. It was still alive and strong; every spring it dressed in bright green leaves, and in the fall it wore reds and oranges and yellows. It was partnered with a friendly river, clear but muddy on the bottom. It talked all year long, quietly.

It was the perfect place to sit and think. One was shaded from the harsh sun and surrounded by an impenetrable aura of languidity. It was wonderful for picnics, reading, relaxing, and young love. This made the tree a prime candidate for an old rope swing.

With her left hand she released the rope, and half of her body trailed just over the water. She sighed with happiness; the wind brushed her cheek like an old lover and the river babbled cheerfully, a best friend from the good days, and across the water on the other bank was an otter.

She closed her eyes and sank down on the old rope, swinging slower and slower, until her fingernails skimmed the surface of the water, creating little ripples in the tiny waves. Her short brown hair fluttered, and then hovered around her face on the back swing. A calm breeze caressed her face and she leaned into it, reveling in the feeling of spring.

Finally, Carly stepped back onto the riverbank. Her toes dug into the ground and she wiggled them in deeper, and stood gazing at the river with her arms crossed. Then she sat at the edge of the river. She folded her hands in her lap, unfolded them, and then she tangled her fingers together in a mesh. She sighed reflectively.

"I remember when we first came out here." She paused. "It was a sunny day, right after church, and the snow had just melted, and we all came out here. It was the four of us in those days. We were following the railroad tracks when we came upon the trestle. It was old and crumbling; it still is." She gestured vaguely to the railroad bridge over the water, further down to the right. Railroad ties were

missing, and the wood was rotting in some places, but it was still fairly safe to walk on.

"We walked real slow across it, because we didn't want to fall into the river, and while we were walking, someone spotted the rope, swinging over the water." She stared at the trestle, and then shook her head and continued. "So we decided to come down here. At first, we were all too afraid to try the rope swing, but we got more daring as time went on and we each swung on it a couple of times. It was so new, so fresh, so exciting and different." She rolled her big, muddy brown eyes, "I know it's just a rope swing, and they're a dime a dozen, but this was our undiscovered rope swing. It was special." She threw a rock into the river and watched the circles widen. "Well, soon we were jumping in the water and partying. Lots of noise, lots of fun. I mean, this was three or four years ago, we were teenagers!"

Carly laughed and turned back to the tree. Trish and Tom were sitting there on the low hanging branches, leaning back against the old, loving tree. Trish was staring intently at the sunlight playing through the canopy of leaves overhead. Her blue eyes were dreamy, thoughtful, and she swung her arms playfully next to the branch. Tom was watching Trish like a puppy watches his master, waiting, hopeful, and loving. He ran his hand through his short blond hair and smiled happily. Carly snapped a branch in her hand, a branch she didn't know she was holding, and frowned. Tom jumped guiltily and turned to Carly. Trish, moving slower, also turned and faced her best friend, and grinned. "Do you remember that?" Carly asked Tom. He nodded slowly.

Beside him, Trish nodded eagerly, her black hair swinging wildly; almost falling off the branch on which she was lounging. Trish said enthusiastically, "You and Tom were doing the couple swings, the two of you together, and it took both of us to catch you, because it was hard to land." Tom rubbed his eyes and blinked. Trish jumped up and continued. "Yeah, it was so much fun! We made you swing out really far so you could get a dead branch out of the tree."

Carly grinned. "And Tom jumped off the swing into the water and almost landed on that huge branch, and when he came up, his hair wasn't blond anymore, it was all muddy."

Tom shook his head, his brown eyes sad. "Why don't we have fun like that anymore?" he asked nostalgically, his low voice calming the two girls' excitement. He put his arm around Trish's small waist and drew her closer. Trish looked up at him and softly smiled, and he held her close.

Carly looked away, biting back tears. The only audible noises were the birds and the river whispering about old loves and old flames that die hard, and friendships that take their toll on a heavy, lying, saddened heart. "We'll have a ball at your wedding, Tom."

~Laurel Herget

Melting Snow

The silence equals the darkness
Blacker than a thousand midnights
Off in the distance a body stirs
Deaf to the sound.
It takes a certain breed
To achieve
The audibility
Of the sound of melting snow.

~Ben Bettez

The Transformation

I was tired. The day had been hot, the first real hot day of the spring. I had been working under the fierce sun all day, weeding. There can be no mercy for weeds. They mar the splendid beauty of any flower; I would not have that, not in my garden. So the monotonous work of weeding had to be done. My fingers press into the cold soil; dirt embeds itself under the shelter of my fingernail; grab the root and pull, move on to the next weed. Dirt fills in between the cracks of my skin; I locate the root and pull, I move onto the next weed. I was bent over in this tedious position for over eight hours. I was tired, but at least I was done. The day was passing, and I could finally relax and imagine what the hand-tilled soil that lay before me would be transformed into in a few weeks. I imagined... I couldn't. I had given my garden every ounce of my energy that day. A kink tightened in my neck, I rolled my head back, trying to break the grasp on me, but I was paralyzed. I sat captivated, head tilted back, staring at the sky above me. The sun was setting and an array of colors shot across the horizon and above. I could see a lion, puffy red and orange hues made up his remarkable face. Rays of blue and purple were transformed into his mane, and hues of deep orange sculpted his frame. I stood there barely breathing, watching the furious lion chase the sunset. I mustered a smile in amazement. It had been a great day; I got a lot of work done in the garden... I could imagine...

~Michelle Cote

Marge Wilson

Marge Wilson worked the switchboard for forty-five years. Same cubicle. Same chair. Her old butt-cheeks even wore the chair paint. Her elbow wore the desk where she would lean all day and press buttons, chew gum and switch wires. All those years passed and she never knew exactly what it was she did, but who cares! It got her out of her crummy flat and away from her bed-ridden husband.

Oh there was talk between the other ladies about the true nature of their business but no one questioned too much. It wasn't safe to, besides it was one of the *better jobs*. Did it matter? It mattered to Marge Wilson because she was a switchboard worker. And she'd walk around all day like she had secrets in her pocket. She wasn't one of those mindless dope-heads in the upper towers. And never would she be fired, oh no, because she kept her mouth shut. And should she see anything suspicious through those beady eyes and pointed glasses, she'd bring them down, and they'll go down good because she won't. But no one really cared for Marge Wilson or her fabricated status.

She lived for the mornings. That's when the Comp-aid woke and watched Mr. Wilson. She'd paint her nails, curl her wig and slap on all kinds of make-up till it was perfect. Perfect because that's what made her pretty--perfection. Perfection and her Perfect Machine from the General Store. Just stick your face in it and press a button! It really just stretched her face more than anything. She'd be left with loose skin at her jaw and forehead. No problem, she'd push most of the loose stuff under her wig. Work it...work it out, the wrinkles at the jaw, push, and push more, work the skin out, stretch it and stretch more till it all fit just right and looked just perfect.

She hated home. Many times she'd walk in when her husband was awake and wanted to talk. Well, she wouldn't want to talk. No talking, their relationship was fine. All the years of marriage were fine too. Not the way it used to be? Why talk about it, just leave it alone. Leave everything alone! Most of the time she'd activate the Comp-aid and run straight into the bathroom. She'd stick her face in the Perfect

Machine...or just stand there crying until the machine warmed up. Either way, Mr. Wilson's medication would put him to sleep by seven. Then she'd sit and read the gory articles about the latest rebel hits till she fell asleep and woke the next morning to primp. She lived for the mornings. The Perfect Machine would always fix things right up.

The violent shuffle of Noon Break got Marge out of the cubicle and into the open. This gave her the chance to see how much better her nails were than the other secretaries. Marge's nails were *always* perfect, theirs weren't. But most of the time the other secretaries didn't seem interested. They just wanted to talk about stupid things, like their husbands and kids! Oh, she hated kids, and who wants to bother about husbands. They were just nagging machines. Dinner this, fetch the paper that! She had to get everything for her husband, the lazy idiot! She didn't believe, or didn't want to believe, the things the ladies said about their husbands. They were lying because all men were just nag machines, like her husband...so she told herself.

Today was no different than any other day. A red light on her switchboard would go on, she would press the button under it. A green light would go on. She would pull a wire and stick it in the hole above it. A white light would go on. She would just sit there. Another red light would go on. She would press the button under it. Another green light would go on. She would pull another wire and stick it in the hole above it. A white light would go on. She would just sit there, again and so on...

In her cubicle was a clock with a picture of the Emperor's face on it. It was the same clock that was everywhere, in the walls, the floors and above the toilets. Always there, reminding you what time it was. But she didn't mind. She loved the Emperor. She would do anything for him because he loved her too. He even said so, right under his picture on the clocks, *Remember, I Love You. Work Fast. Time is Money.* She smiled when she noticed it was thirty-four seconds till Noon Break. Thirty-four seconds before she could tickle herself silly over her nails. She also enjoyed Noon Break because the feature speaker on the tele-billboard was always motivating.

And the Noon Break horn blew.

The halls swelled with ladies, darting this way and that, stepping on each other's heels. Look! Someone sprained an ankle

over there, how funny. Marge tottered with the crowd. She was trying to catch a glimpse of Hilda's nails when she heard that nonsense about husbands again. Marge Wilson stuck her hand up over her head and said "Hilda, did you see what I've done with my nails?" It was too crowded. And Hilda was talking. She glanced but ignored Marge, that old bag! "Oh Hilda..." There was no answer, just the chattering of the pushing crowd. "Hilda?" Marge asked again in annoyance. Hilda tottered and jabbered. Marge's hand waved back and forth under the pressure of the crowd. It was getting really rough. It always did in the lobby near the spinning doors. Marge insisted that she receive attention. Finally Hilda responded with a question. Not out of spite, but because it just popped into her head. She really wanted to know about Mr. Wilson... So she asked.

"Marge, how is William, I mean how is he coping!" she yelled over all the chattering.

It was a brave question.

All the ladies heard it.

Mona heard it. Louise heard it. Nora heard it.

And Marge thought she heard... what was that?

Her face turned red at the realization. The question was loud and clear over the noise of the shuffling door. Skin squeaked against door-glass and echoed in Marge's ear. Now her face burned, her armpits were warm, her hands wet. Somehow she made it through the doors and was thrown outside into the hot air. Above her, purple sky whirled around and around... purple, red and lots of blue, scarred by tall lurching towers. Nothing registered; she was completely flustered.

Bodies exploded all around her. She could hear the door swoop and then swoop again as it swung behind her. She felt panicky and turned an ankle, fell forward but caught herself. Hilda's question was echoing between steamy temples: *How's William, I mean how is he coping?* She swung around to scold Hilda but only found a mob of suits pressing, zooming by, and leaving trails of hot stale air. And the faces were so gray and dull. All the mindless dopes. A man shouldered her, snarled "Get outta' the way, hag!" She lunged forward again, remembered it was Noon Break when she saw the tele-billboard under a giant ocean of sky. The question, she remembered, disturbed her. Blood pumped heavy through an old heart. Loose skin flapped like a

wet rug around her face. Why do they care? Why, why, why! She was angry and bitter. It all came out in violent shakes. She flung herself around, wanted to lash out. Nothing, nothing to grab, nothing to scratch, hit or tear! Who'd listen? The Emperor will! His shiny face will listen! After all, he cares about me; he says so! At that very second she had a ridiculous thought. She'll find the Emperor. She'll talk with him. He was healthy; he'll listen; he could hold her!

Then, out of the corner of her eye she saw that little boy--the one that always hung off the monument for Noon Break. Marge, clenching her fists, lashed out, "You're gonna' get hurt, you stupid little boy!" she screamed, veins bulge, rage radiates, everything known in her chemistry flared up in one spitting sentence... The rage abruptly subsided, but only because her body forced it to. There, she lashed, it feels... almost good... but now a whirling spin engulfed her. She felt her heart push one loud gush and palpitate. Hot air ceased in her nostrils, her chest made a final jump, an arm went numb and she stumbled bewildered into the crowd on broken heels...

Aaron Ufema
Dirtysock24@aol.com

The first night the stars glowed
High above the pond they shined
As we talked in the dark and moonlight
And the moon looked and almost talked back

~Jessica G Favata

Blue

She walked along the beach barefoot, allowing the sand to slip between her toes and the salt air to brush against her skin. Walks on the beach were rare, and usually she would have savored the sights, the smells and the sensation of being hot and cold at the same time. Hot from the sun and cold from the breeze of the ocean, both taking turns to touch her skin. But today she did not notice this pleasure. She stopped on the shore and saw the light from the sun beaming off the water as she held her daughter's wrist as tightly as she could.

They did not move. Her eyes could only stare off into the endless blue while her daughter struggled to get free.

"Mommy, you're hurting me," the little girl cried, trying desperately to escape. She took her small fingers and pried at her mother's hand, but her efforts were useless. The little girl would remain in captivity.

As they stared off into the distance she noticed that the waves of the ocean were higher that day than she had seen in years. The majestic beauty seemed to hypnotize her. A wave would roll up to a frothing peak and crash down on itself and anything in its way without remorse. The colors of blue, green and white crashed on her toes cooling her feet that had burned in the sand. She stood silently with a hand covering her eyes to block out the sun. She could not see him. She could *not* see him.

"Mommy, where is he?" the little girl asked for what seemed to be the hundredth time.

"I don't know!" she replied not even looking down at her daughter in fear that the little girl might see the tears that had twisted in her eyes. The truth was, she did not know where her son was. How can a mother not know where her son is?

She knelt down in the sand as she listened to the lifeguard she had spoken to forty-five minutes earlier talk into his radio. He had his orange shorts and white nose on and paced back and forth as he continued his conversation. This kid wasn't going to find her son.

"Hey lady, what color shorts did you say your son was wearing?" he asked again. How hard is it to remember that his shorts were blue?

Blue like his eyes, except not as brilliant, a blue that cannot be replicated, not in a crayon box or gallon of paint, only perhaps by the sky on a warm day. Everything had become blue.

Not long before, six people, not including the lifeguards, had marched up and down the beach frantically looking for her son. Every child began to look like him. They all had seemed to have coarse blonde hair, bottomless blue eyes, and a slight body that revealed every rib. She turned away from the ocean for the first time and saw a courageous little boy trudging towards her, his head held high, then dropping to cover tears--tears that he had swallowed down in search of hope and discovery.

Could it be him?

Where had he been?

Honestly, at that instant it did not matter. She bent down, released her daughter's wrist, scooped up her son awkwardly, and buckled under his weight into the sand. He said nothing and did not need to. He just sat there on her lap, staring at her with his eyes shining blue.

~Jacquie Carter

Down and Away (Stone Field, May 2, 1994)

Hurting. Suffering. I realize my fate.

Mind is spinning, body in agony

Lifted in terror; my chances too late

Blindness. Disillusion. The world becomes a blur to me

Praying I'm missed, rejoicing in hate;

Another showdown with the end; finally three.

Released I am. Forgotten I'll be.

And for now I shall stay, down and away.

~Kevin Hadmack

Apple trees, burst into blossom, litter the damp shaded path with white, and I am in love with this day, every day, in the May woods. Sister-roots reach bent fingers across the path, catching rocks and cradling the hillside. Cardinals, fugitive, fluttering red like rags adorn the trees. Surprised ducks explode from the marsh-water, a deafening rush of wings in the blue arch of sky.

Fiddleheads, filmed with ecstatic downy fluff, huddle, like children sharing secrets at the edge of the meadow. One penny dropped into the water, a gift for the river-god, shines against the mossed rock, too heavy for the current.

~Shannon Hard

Complacent

She gently brushed her hair aside and raised her face towards the sun. She closed her eyes, raised her eyebrows and let serenity massage her face until it washed into a smile. She caressed the back of her neck, rolled her head towards me and slowly opened her eyes, which looked into mine as if she had been staring at me all along. "What are you thinking?" she asked with a raised eyebrow and a half grin.

"I'm not thinking of anything in particular," I said quickly. There was a long silence. I turned away and stared off into the field.

"You're not telling the truth," she said.

I reached for my empty wine glass and looked back at her. "I'd tell you if something were bothering me," I assured.

She grabbed the bottle and quickly hid it under the blanket. With her other hand still clutching the bottle, she grabbed my chin and gently pulled my face towards hers. "Don't worry, I'll stay for a little while," she whispered.

My eyes dropped. "Just make sure you remember," I muttered as I felt a single tear stream down my face. She kissed my forehead and filled my glass. There was a long silence. I turned away to the field again. The wind had died and the sun was resting on the horizon.

~Andrew Melnicki

Nothing to Fear

I loved that route. I loved the people in it. What pleased me so much wasn't necessarily even that particular set of houses, but the job itself. I was paying my debt to society. I was earning my way, contributing to the comfort of the modern man, by bringing him his paper. Delivering always made me happy. The trees hiss above my head in that woodland neighborhood as I walk. I can always smell the fresh air... except for that one spot by the horses' field. I loved to think about life while I walked. I'd think about how my future might turn out, or maybe just daydream about superpowers or another world. One thing I have had a lot of time to think about was what I would do if I ever faced real danger. But after ten years, I knew that I would never have to worry about that.

I have just finished talking to Mrs. Korhomon. She is a sweet old lady who always appreciates an ear to listen to her. "I wonder if she'll move in with her son," I think. I begin to approach the big downhill slope on the route, and also one of the few notable houses. I make a mental count in my head, "Four of five." Gripping a paper from my side pouch, I fold it in half and roll it. Looking at the house on the left, I feel as if the house has changed in some way. There is an absence of bustling, there is no scurrying, nothing leaping, and instead of a smashing against the door, there is a peaceful silence. Then, looking to the front lawn, the horrible truth dawns on me.

Time Stops. The rush of blood and thoughts that flow into me overwhelms me. My legs lock as if they have rigor mortis, and I stop in my tracks. I can't breathe. Heat fills my insides. On the lawn, the dog seems to bask in its unchained freedom. "Dogs would never hurt a human," a woman's words come to my mind about her own dog, "unless they were in danger." I think to myself that I will pass quietly and be okay. It's too late. I am frozen in my tracks. Thirty feet away, its beady eyes meet mine.

Its body explodes with a bark, and in an instant it is galloping towards me. Fight or flight memories come to me. "I was charged by

a big German shepherd and just stood my ground..." my cousin Larry chuckles in my head. The dog is running toward me. "Dogs will obey people when spoken to," my father teaches me in a flashback. "Just tell them, 'No, and Down boy'." It is twenty feet away and I, still locked where I have been standing, point a reluctant, but reprimanding finger and yell, "NO!" with a stern scowl. Physically breaking through the invisible wall my mind has created, it gurgles a groan out of its throat. "I killed two dogs!" I hear, as my neighbor John swears, "Bore their eyes out with my bare hands!" Bracing myself for defense, my foot takes a startled step back. Seven feet away, it is still speeding towards me with demon possession in its eyes. "...I just stood my ground..." my cousin Larry continues, "...and it stopped; pushed its nose right up against me, and then turned and left." I hold my breath and stand my ground.

Three feet from me, the frenzied dog leaps. I am blinded by my own terror, which has taken over the voices in my head. My eyes are given release for a moment, as I see the vicious animal clutched to my leg, tearing at the fabric of my jeans and my skin. I can hear a sound, I don't have time to think about its source, but it is an inarticulate, air shattering, cry of anguish. A thought squeezes its way out, and my dog-killing neighbor's face appears, to remind me that I am bigger.

On autopilot, I begin to carry out the rehearsed dog-defensive procedure. No longer petrified, I fling myself free from its berserk clutches. It is thrown off and my leg cocks backwards. It whirls around like a wild beast and my leg swings with adrenaline pumped force. With a whack, serenity has its moment as I watch the creature, which has no wings, fly backwards three feet, high into the air. For an instant, fear turns to exultation! I watch it soar for a full moment. Victory is mine!

Then, as suddenly as it's feet hit the ground, it is rebounding towards me. Blinded once again, all I know is that for an unknown period of time, I am shaking, kicking, and undergoing a vicious attack. I now identify the horrific bursts of sound as my own uncontrolled voice.

Then, one last thought manifests itself for the first time; it is the only thought that I can think. "RUN!" I turn as quickly as I can. My

legs gain strength to carry me at a speed that I have never gone before as I begin to escape the frenzied animal. My eyes open completely as well as my nose and ears. Then, I feel a nip in the area that I had just exposed to my enemy. "OUCH!" I yell as I feel the pain in my hindquarters. In my awareness, I plot out an escape route. Away I run and hurdle over a stone wall and keep on running. I am safe now, and my attacker is gone. Terror-stricken and on the verge of crying, I can feel my entire body tingling. I am weaker than I have ever been. Desperate for help, I can only think of one other thing. "How can anyone live around these monsters?"

~Thomas Meiners

Hearing your voice
Strong and masculine
With a hint of self-doubt
Come crackling through the phone lines
Triggered a hope hidden tight in my chest
And surfaced it
Once more.

Fearing that my sanity could not bear to be
With you
I choked
And cloaked
My insecurities in assurances and smiles

Inside, I knew I didn't want to be with you at all
And my mind just wanted to destroy us both
Make us burn
And crash together
Together—I think that's the part I liked

~Melissa Jeltsen

Guinness

After a long, tough day, there is only one thing I look forward to--a tall glass of Guinness. When I stand at the bar and order, I feel like a kid waiting for a present from his parents. I watch as the thick, black liquid pours, from its cold, dark cell into a curvy, clear, pint glass. The bartender stops to let the fluid settle a little; and I watch the frothy, creamy head slowly form on top of the beer. It seems like the froth slowly dances up the sides of the glass to create its pillow-like head for me to relax on. The bartender then continues to pour more of this holy water into my chalice. When she's done she slowly picks the glass up, and spills a little, then looks at me and I at her. I let a smile slowly roll across my face; and by my look, she knows I am pleased. I watch her as she slowly floats my frothy friend over to play; and I notice she's like an angel bringing a holy message to me. I long for its smooth body and can even taste it before the black gold touches my tongue. She softly places my beverage in front of me, and I wait, wait, and watch the beer turn from off-white to a cold, dark night, with a creamy white cloud floating over its head.

~Chris Chouinard

From *War Stories and Other Tales*: "Typhoon"

To begin, I must preface this story with an explanation of the time and place. You see, this was my first military enlistment and now after three years of service at the ripe old age of twenty-four I was assigned to the USS Fletcher DD-445. Vietnam was raging. We were home ported out of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and part of DEBRON (destroyer squadron) 252. "The Eager Beavers." The Fletcher was 385' long and 54' at her beam. They called her a greyhound for she was long, sleek and fast. She had a compliment of 350 officers and men. Her keel was laid in 1938; she saw action in World War Two from Guadalcanal to Luzon in the Pacific, then Korea and now her second voyage to Vietnam and my first. We had sailing orders to steam to Subic Bay, the Philippines, via Guam, then to the "Gun Line" off the coast of South Vietnam, in support of the Marine forces. Pearl Harbor was five days behind us and we were heading west. The year: 1968.

Day 1

"Now hear this! Now hear this!" blared over the ship's internal communications system (1MC). "All hands prepare for heavy weather, batten down all hatches. Stow all nonessential equipment." We have hours before encountering the Typhoon off Guam. Now is the time to ready the ship for the storm, equipment is stored in lockers or tied down. Our Chief Petty Officer came into my little machine shop.

"Tower," he said, "are you ready for the blow?"

"I think so, Chief, all I have to do is bolt the lockers closed and make sure all is tied down."

"Ok, if you need a hand let me know, we have some people who can give you some help."

"Thanks, Chief," and he left.

It was lunchtime and, unknowingly, our last hot meal for some time.

Slowly you could start to feel the potency of the impending storm. The Fletcher pitched up and down with a faster more powerful rhythm than usual. For a sailor, this is nothing, you take the pitching in your knees, that way you don't slosh your coffee and let the storm win out over you. The 1MC blared again, "All hands are restricted below deck unless otherwise authorized."

Coffee, the lifeblood of the military. It gets you up in the morning, keeps you warm when it's cold, keeps you company on long night watches and provides a good lubricant for conversation. The military life is not that bad either: good food, good camaraderie, interesting work and good training. However, it is sometimes filled with long periods of utter, absolute, total boredom punctuated with moments of sheer, utter terror.

The seas were starting to run higher, the pitch and roll increased with the tempo of the sea. Now it was "over one (wave) and under two." Waves crashed against the bridge and superstructure thirty feet above us, fiercely falling onto the open decks. You would have to be an idiot to be out there.

The day wore on--more equipment to lash down, personal belongings to store in lockers, lend other sections a helping hand doing the same. And the relentless sea keeps getting heavier and heavier. From time to time a rogue wave would slam us from the side causing the Fletcher to keel over. "All hands!" screamed the 1MC, "All hands, after evening chow turn into your bunks and fasten your sea straps." (These keep you from falling out of your rack during heavy weather.) Supper, cold bologna and cheese sandwiches with black coffee. Steel bulkheads and deck surround us as we pitch and roll with increasing fervor. Strapped into our bunks, all there is to do is to read, talk and pray as night comes on. We toss and turn, roll and pitch, but there is no sleep. Night becomes a day without sunlight.

Day 2

Reveille, 0600 hours. We are still bounding with the sea, but now it's "over one and under three." To the mess deck for breakfast, cold bologna and cheese sandwiches with hot black coffee. "All hands," blares the 1MC. "All hands not on duty are confined to the berthing spaces--smoking lamp is out!" The trash cans soon start to

fill up and the spilled litter rolls about the deck. The head starts to smell of urine and vomit—no way to clean up the mess. We can go to the mess deck for coffee but getting there is its own adventure. One foot on the bulkhead, one foot on the deck, in a serpentine walk through the ship, careful not to slam your head on a doorway or spill your hard won coffee. Nothing to do but read, play cards, talk and pray.

Lunchtime—we sit on the deck in the midship's passageway outside the mess hall. On the bulkhead is an inclinometer; our eyes are glued to the plum bob as the ship rolls from side to side. Suddenly, a wave crashes against our portside and we are heeled over—48-degree roll. Another slams us—42-degree roll. DO NOT BREATHE, we collectively hold our breath. Any further and the ship could breach. SLAM! Another wave crashes against the portside and she heels over—44-degree roll. The Fletcher is shaking, shuddering, teetering on the abyss; are we going over pervades everyone's mind. Slowly, oh so very slowly, she starts to right herself. A sigh of relief as we look at each other with bulging eyes. Maybe, hopefully, we have seen the worst of this typhoon. Cold bologna and cheese sandwiches with coffee for lunch.

Supper, again more cold bologna and cheese sandwiches and black coffee. No sleep this night either as we strap ourselves into our racks.

Day 3

Reveille, 0600. Breakfast--cold bologna and cheese sandwiches with black coffee. I don't know how the coffee maker can work while the ship rolls so violently. But we have coffee, and the sea has noticeably slackened, still no one is allowed above deck and it is beginning to stink in the berthing spaces, especially since no one has been able to take a shower and the smell from the head infiltrates our area.

Claustrophobia is closing in. I've got to get some fresh air. Sneaking through the ship I make my way to a watertight door just behind the starboard side breakwater on the open deck. Carefully I open the door; it is late morning—behold! The mad, churning, boiling sea—colors: deep, deep blue, blue, green, white set against a sky of

turmoil--rolling, angry dark rain filling tropical clouds. This is not day, but some figment of an unspeakable horror. Waves, forty, fifty feet high crashing over each other. Froth is cut like wheat chaff from the wave tops by a screaming banshee wind as if mowed by some huge scythe of God and flung to the wind. The awful power of the deep is present. The deck is awash with the boiling sea. I am humbled by the awesome presence of such majesty. A truly fearsome sight as I brace myself against the breakwater, coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other, and fresh air.

As morning becomes afternoon, the sea has started to quiet down, but still we are restricted below decks. It is still too dangerous to be out there, and I should know. "BONG—BONG—BONG! This is not a drill, this is not a drill," shrills the 1MC. "BATTLE STATIONS! All hands man your battle stations, enemy sonar contact." Movie flashback—recently we had seen the movie "The Bedford Incident," about a Navy destroyer in a confrontation with a Soviet nuclear submarine. They obliterated each other on a placid sea with nuclear weapons. The Fletcher is armed with ASROC, a nuclear tipped antisubmarine rocket/torpedo, and we knew that they had nuclear torpedoes. Another "Bedford Incident" for real on the backside of a typhoon? God help us!

We wait, we wait, and we wait as the hours drag torturously by. The 1MC blares, "All hands, nonessential personnel will stand down from battle stations, set condition 2." Back to my little machine shop and nothing to do. Suddenly, a head pops through the door. It's Jeff, a buddy of mine, sonar technician second class. "Hey, guy," he says, "I've got to repair one of the sonar units, you want to come along?"

"Sure. Beats sitting here." Off we go to the very bowels of the ship, six decks down. Each hatch on the way down has to be opened and re-secured. This takes time, but as we progress downward the violent pitching becomes less and less as we reach the bottom of the ship. A quiet bit of rest from the previous two days.

Finally, we get to the sonar spaces—on the other side of this steel, the storm-tossed Pacific Ocean. It is a small cramped compartment filled with one piece of equipment surrounded by heavy rubber electrical insulation. Jeff takes off the cover of the unit and we

talk about getting back to Pearl, having a good meal at a good restaurant off base, (we're both food buff) and what we will do when we reach Subic Bay. We're hit by a huge powerful rogue wave on the starboard side. The Fletcher heavily rolls, Jeff's foot slips, he calls my name as if he knows what will happen next. The sound of a high-power electrical surge short-circuiting, the awful stench of burning hair and flesh and insulation. The compartment fills with thick acrid smoke.

No—Jeff!" I scream. A wooden broom handle in the corner—I lever him out—he slumps to the matting—I hit the switch on the 1MC. "Bridge—emergency—medical emergency—sonar room 2." The military trains us well: you don't think, you act upon your training. "Jeff, are you all right?" as I shake him his eyes are completely dilated, no breath, no pulse—carotid or radial. His belt buckle is completely melted. CPR—lift the head back, opening the airway, three breaths—watch the chest rise, find the zyphoid, press two fingers above the bottom of the sternum—five heart compressions then three more breaths—repeat—repeat—repeat—repeat-repeat—repeat until exhaustion, and repeat again.

Time is all we have and all time is relative, according to Albert Einstein. Further, all time is personal from the observer's point of view, and seconds become hours, minutes become years, and a naive young man becomes quite old. Surrealistically our medical corpsman comes down through the hatch looking like a scarecrow dressed in his underwear: white tee shirt, boxer shorts, black socks and shoes, medical bag hung around his neck.

"Ok," He says, "I'll do the breathing, you continue with the compressions—then we'll switch." As a team we work on Jeff. Every few minutes he would check him with his stethoscope; we switch. How long did we work on him—unknown.

Later I crawl up out of the compartment; walk, crawl, climb past a blur of faces and back to the open deck and the boiling sea. Out of nowhere a voice says, "Who authorized you to be out here?"

"I did," I respond, my back turned to that unknown voice. And the sea boiled and churned, foam broke free from the wave tops and she took another soul into her bosom.

He didn't win a medal or a decoration for his action; he just died for his country.

"Why this war? Why this stupid war?"

*Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie,
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.
This be the verse you grave for me:
For here he is where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*
(by Robert Louis Stevenson)

~K A Tower

The pot plant behind me is
Dying
It tells a tale of neglect
and loneliness
that's too familiar a story
in my life of late

My work has lost it's jazz
and appeal
And my poetry –
shattered and chaotic
reflecting the downward spiral
of the path I don't remember
choosing

~Melissa Jeltsen

Brother's Gift: Part 1

Many eons ago, when the world was an infant and angels watched the land from high above as God's eyes, two young angels in the Lord's favor were appointed permanent guardians of the people. They were the only two fledglings allowed to intervene in mortal affairs down below.

The older one of this pair was my brother, Christian--a beautiful blonde-haired, blue-eyed being, with downy soft wings as white as alabaster, and a heart of gold. I, Jordan, his sister, and the other half of this pair, had black hair and brown eyes, with beige wings and a heart of white gold. I look nothing like my brother; in fact I am his opposite in many ways.

As I said before, we guarded the beings below day in and day out from our posts in the clouds high above. Christian, the ever-diligent watcher, never missed a detail that crossed his path. I, on the other hand, just couldn't pay attention to all that went on down there. My attention was always caught on one occurrence here or another over there. I loved going down to intervene and help where needed; I just hated leaving afterwards. I wanted to stay there with the humans, could do so much more for them than just watch from above. I was an angel, though, and I knew I could never let anyone know of these thoughts. Not even my brother whom I loved more than anything else. Little did I know, though, that as my Christian watched the mortals below, he also watched me.

"Jordan, come here, my sister," beckons the blonde angel from his post by the edge.

"Yes, my brother," I answer, not twenty feet away.

As I reach his side, an arm snakes around my waist pulling me even closer. The other appendage is pointing down to the earth below us.

"What do you see Little One? Describe it to me," he asks.

Gazing down below I answer, "Lands green as emeralds, and bright like diamonds. Waters of azure blue, clear as crystals, mirroring the sky in their depths. The sun's golden rays kissing each leaf, rock, human, and animal, warming them with its vibrant touch. Life echoing through the wind with its screams and

howls, moving with the surf and in the footprints that leave their marks on its sandy shores."

I continue on, describing the creatures and beings I see down there. I fail to register my brother hanging onto every word I say, so caught up am I in my tale. At the end of my telling I turn to him for his approval and am taken aback by what I see. Silvery tears run down my Christian's cheeks, draining into his upturned lips.

"Tears? Why are you crying Christian, is my description that bad?" I ask as I wipe the glistening drops from his eyes.

"On the contrary, dear Jordan, it was that beautiful. My tears are of my happiness not sorrow."

He hugs me for a moment, and then continues. "Jordan, I need to ask you an important question that you must answer truthfully."

"Alright," I answer, wondering what it could be.

"Are you happy here in the clouds, watching and guarding those down below?" he queries.

"Of course, I am, Christian; to be the Lord's eyes, watching over his people, is an honor rarely given," I rush out.

"Yes, it is, but I asked if YOU, my sister, are happy here." He looks out and down to the earth below. "Or do you feel limited up here, feel you could do so much more for them if only you could walk among them and stay there."

"WHAT! Wait a..." I sputter, only to have a finger pressed to my lips in the sign of quiet.

"Hear me out, Little One," he pleads, continuing on: "My little angel, being the watcher and brother that I am, did you think I would not notice those frowns that creased your sweet face each time we returned, or the smiles rarely seen above shine brightly when below? Why did you feel you needed to hide your feelings of unrest from not only God, but your own brother?" The hurt is mirrored in his eyes.

"Oh, my Christian, my poor Christian. What have I done?" Please, my brother, understand, I meant no harm," I cry.

"Hush, Jordan, let me finish," he commands softly, though his words are backed with steel. "I talked to the Lord the other day of my observations and asked him for advice. He smiled at me kindly and

said that there comes a time when we all must let go of the things we love the most. You remember that little phrase that woman said to her daughter about the horse?" Questioning blue eyes turn to me.

In a daze I recite that beautiful saying. "If you love something, let it go. If it should come back to you, it is yours. Should it not, it was never meant to be."

Christian's voice chimes in and we repeat it again together.

A smile appears on his face at the end and he continues his talk. "Well, I thought it over and I went back to him to ask a favor." He pauses. "Jordan, if you got the chance to walk the earth as a mortal, to live and die as they do, would you?"

"Yes, I would," I blurt out.

My Christian smiles, nodding his head at me. Once again I see those silver raindrops streak down his face. "That is what I thought." A sigh follows this. "Then, my Jordan, I guess the last things I need to say are: I love you, I'll be looking out for you from up here, and that one day you will return to my side."

My Christian's arms encircle me, holding me secure to his chest. Then he starts to chant, softly at first then becoming louder as he continues. Soon a light starts to outline our bodies, glowing brighter as the chanting grows louder. This continues until all I can see is the light and all I hear is my brother's voice. The light is blinding now, and as I feel myself losing consciousness I hear him whisper the last phrase. "With love, I set you free."

~Denise Matte

Rise of Hope

The sun shone on all life, caring and comforting. All life knew of the sun and its watchful eye. It soaked in and radiated back the light and warmth so that all was filled and each and every one thing touched another.

He climbed higher up the mountain until finally he could see far in every direction the rocks and the trees and the mountains and the animals. Up here everything was fine. This is where life began. Below, things were all wrong; so wrong. The lower you get the more you remember that. But here it is peaceful. This is life as it should be, lacking the poisons of the world, those who poison and the uncaring. Here in his natural home things made sense. Here there was less weight. His step was lighter and eyes brighter. He found purpose now as he walked to the next breathing scenario of bubbling brook gently caressing earth or osprey gliding effortlessly on currents of wind. He knew that here he would be welcomed wherever he went and that this place had no closing time. He felt the light of the sun permeate and flow warmly and evenly through him. This is where he lives. He would come again soon.

~Cory Bailey

Wild Horses to Plastic

I remember being young
How I thought I could fly
By holding an umbrella
And jumping off the deck
How I used to make bouquets
For my mother
In the autumn
With all the prettiest colored leaves
I could find
How I used to play with my expensive model horses
In the sand pile at the bottom of the driveway
And it was so real
To be in all those little worlds
And believe anything
When toys could come alive
And trees could be kingdoms
And stuffed animals could talk
When I left the room
I remember the day
That playing suddenly wasn't as interesting
And it was more fun to hang out with my friends
And pretend to be grown up, and sophisticated
And now, when I'm going through boxes in the cellar
I'll pull out an old toy here and there
Love worn and battered by play
With broken-off legs and chipped paint
Saved through the years
And I'll hold it in my hands, and turn it over and look at it
And try to remember the way I saw it
Through my child eyes
Once upon a time
How it was so very real and alive to me then
And how now it seems to be
Just a piece of plastic

Sometimes, I wish so badly
To return to childhood again, just for a little while
And see things again
The way I did then

~Eileen Torni

All at once I am some strange creature in the dark, barefoot and looking at the window that glows faintly at night, with the streetlight and the stars and the occasional traffic, blind-footed in the dark and expecting a snowstorm. The quiet hushing sound of cars coasting through the street as if in a rain, but there is no rain, not tonight. The relentless summer music of crickets anonymous in the tall grass and frogs chorusing up from the pond. Straight up, the muse has denied me water and I lie here in these sheets, with my scattered thoughts and the light in my head like a sun-filled rift in the clouds, a growing clarity, an expansiveness that I cannot control but am free to enjoy.

Frail ghosts of silver moth-bodies littering the streets, a spider's web blown concave by the wind from the lake, a silver net, a funnel, a perfect tenuous construction.

Transfixed in the halo of candlelight, the violins like little razors and the Spanish radio late at night. Transfiguration -- is that what I sense rolling in on the delicate night air? Suspended from a thin string, and what is going to drop? I can feel it approaching, and there is a faint clattering over the far hills, drawing closer, closer on horseback, faster and faster, the rattling of armor, the horses flecked with foam, and I know it's important and necessary but it is an uneasy thing.

~Shannon Hard

Tangleberry Web

*"And then she approached
With soft seductive wonder
Poisonous fingertips
And eyes of quicksand."*

-King Olious III

A lustrous frozen horizon sat in the cold pools of her eyes. The view was swept up and captured in her pupil, a pupil dense like a great black hole. And the icy reflection trapped under her long lashes would torture spring mornings to come. The frozen landscape itself told a thousand stories, kept a thousand secrets hidden in it's jagged mountain peaks. Her long coat was swept up suddenly in a quick gust, rolling about violently till grabbed, fumbled with and tamed by a lady-in-waiting. The gust, which was extremely cold, was only *petting* to her skin. A deep breath and she ordered her servant out. Silently, timber doors slid to a close.

She, a princess maybe, was covered in the most suitable garments of the land (except, of course, dragon hide). She bore thick velvet mesh, edged with red fur, tousled like fire and hugged tightly around her breasts, arms and shoulders. Elegant twirling decorations plagued every corner of the fabric. She hugged herself as the inner lining of rare fur coursed her skin in delightful arrogance. She--with long red hair that was twirled into perfect balls atop her head--was a formidable potential for the king. Her skin sparkled with polished brown sugar. Her aura was elegant and curved with hips of welcoming fancy. But her soft touch and charm deliberately overshadowed her true nature, her twisted motive.

All that was needed for capture was a flicker of her crimson orbs. She could burn a church or sink a ship with one look. None could see--no matter how deeply sought--the true nature of this beast. She was capable of such treachery that would bury a kingdom. And all this cunningly behind soft lids of sugar cane and cinnamon. She was a true actor of worlds--worlds of drafty spice to warp one's soul with love. Then with precise timing and creeping senses she'd feed off one's need and obsession for her own poisonous skin.

She opened her eyes with swirling brightness and released her coat from tightly drawn shoulders. A silky backless blouse revealed a hideous depiction of a spider across her naked back. The spider crept with long jointed legs as her shoulder bones reset. Tight muscles wrapped her frame from head to foot and her skin turned red at its exposure to the arctic wind. She whirled from the stone terrace and glided over steps into her quarters.

Behind her, long thin curtains blew in and out of high pointed transoms. The chill this time of year was unbearable. But not for her. She adored the winter ice. She loved cold, short days and the rising moons (strong pulling moons which she obeyed).

The center of the chamber was filled with an enormous divan, made of dark, dark wood with high, thick posts and a wide, goblin-down mattress. The bed was veiled and looked over a candle-ridden hearth that groaned with icy winds, for it would bear no warmth for such a snake as she. Double wooden doors closed in the unadorned but enormous chamber.

How pleased she was with herself. To make it this far in rank--a king's castle! She whirled in circles, dancing across the room. *What shall I call myself tonight? The princess of the dark night? No. That for sure has been taken*, she thought. She whirled again, around and around, like her evil web, and flung herself onto the bed. Merriment of giggles escaped her lips. *It won't be long now. Only moments.*

"What is it my love?" she said aloud. "What is it I shall call myself tonight? Are you listening, precious? Why, where are you, where have you crept to?" A hint of worry was now under her voice. She sat up and searched with her eyes only. "My love? Oh, there you are, you sneaky little daemon!" She placed her hand on the bed as a small spider crept up over her finger. "What is it I shall call myself, my sweet little spider?" She rolled her knuckles and the spider moved quickly onto her palm. She brought the little creature to eye level. "So, what do you think, precious?"

In a quiet rasping voice, "You almost sat on me again." The spider said.

"I know, I'm so very sorry, kiss, kiss. So what do you think?"

"Are you a princess now?" the spider asked.

"Yes, tonight I am! Yes, yes! I *am* evil, aren't I, my love?"

"The evilest...then we shall call you princess Spidris."

"Oh, you are a brilliant creature. You little daemon!" She bounced up and down on the mattress. The spider wavered on its high jointed legs, pleased with itself.

"Spidris, why didn't I think of that? It's wonderful. I'm princess Spidris tonight."

The spider grew still and grave. "Did you bring it?"

"Oh, yes, I found some. The last bit of it, I wonder. Now, with it, no one will stand in our way. The king will never know what came over him. I'll simply dip my finger in his wine and everything will be fine!"

The spider, still graver, "Can I have him, the prize... the king?"

"Oh, no my love, he must live so that he does not sleep. He would be much too big for you. But not to worry your vile little hunger," she said as she ever so gently massaged the spiders back, "Three sedated rats lie in a cage below the bed. That should hold you." She set her hand to the floor. The lanky little spider crept off her palm.

As if peering up at her, the spider said, "You know my hunger grows, princess, for a larger prize?"

"Yes, of course love, all will come in due time. Run along now. I have lives to ruin."

"You *are* evil," the spider said as it lurched under the bed.

She smiled to herself. She was a long time in waiting to score such a prize, as tonight would soon bear. Finally she could put her seductive measures to use, her very own magic! And now, only moments away. She rose and took from a very large trunk, at the foot of the bed, a glass bowl. The bowl was covered in a cloth and tied shut. She unwrapped it, wide-eyed. Inside laid dried leaves and berries, ones thought to be out of existence. But no, she possessed maybe the last of such a cursed plant. The smell of the berries filled her as she drew a long breath. Nestled in the scent were many resourceful things, healing and youthfulness. But blessed in vile ways, the dried foliage could freeze eternity. It could even freeze magic itself. And nothing can stop a black witch and dried tangleberry...

She rubbed the leaves about her fingers. Their perfume would seduce the king long enough for her to dip a finger in his wine. The wine, then transformed and delicious indeed, would hold him from sleep forever.

Rising slowly and chattering something under her breath, she admitted her mind into an overwhelming trance that could lure the heavens. And it would guide her every move, along with her captivating eyes. The so-called princess was now ready for the king. She shed her blouse and felt the winter shudder at her back, for the season itself felt wrapped in her web and knew it would never give way to warmth again.

She walked through the doors, and as they slid shut, somewhere in the shadows was the hideous death rattle of a choking rat.

~Aaron Ufema
Dirtysock24@aol.com

I was born ethereal
A son of the eternal
Born of earth, material
Maternal and paternal.

And yet, the Lord in his design
Would ask that I live line by line
Line by line, an aural art
Calling on the rhythm of the heart
Is that to be my life, O Lord?
A life inside the word?
I am grateful, yes, O Lord,
And yet, without the flesh I am absurd.

-Matthew Richardson

A Dream?

I was nine years old, and, Pep, you were what, fifty-two, fifty-three? So young, I remember, anyway. We had our picture taken together, wearing the wigs I had got for Christmas that year. You made such a funny face I couldn't stop laughing. I laughed so hard, I was actually crying. You always did know how to put a smile on my face and laughter rumbling in my belly. Pepe, Pep, where did you go? Oh, I must be dreaming....

There you are, shoveling the stalls, getting the horses ready for a ride. When you finished you lifted me up on the horse, so gently holding the reigns and speaking soft but stern to Princess, "giddy up, t,t,t, woe girl," then you patted her mane and gave her a kiss. You were so patient with her and with me, never irritable or angry, always pleasant and fun to be with. Every moment I spend with you a seed is sewn. The love I have for you in my heart grows deeper as each moment passes. Pepe, I lost you again. I can't talk to you if you keep leaving. Oh, I must still be dreaming....

Why, hello again. I'm so glad you're back. I was just thinking about that fish you caught not too long ago. What was it, two, three months ago? Your sense of humor is always so striking. Quite attractive, I should say. And no matter what, it never does run dry. That fish you caught was maybe three inches long, by the way. I know you can't see very well, but even you knew it wasn't five feet long. It's just like you, always trying to find a chuckle here or there. Pepe, now where are you? Actually this is kind of fun. We haven't played hide-n-seek since I was a little girl. All right, Pep, where are you? I give up, Pepe..Pepe? I'm still dreaming....

Pepe, where have you been? Gee, you've lost a lot of weight. Why are you so tired lately? All you want to do is sleep, although you still seek me out when I come to visit. No matter how sick or tired you are you always manage to give me a smooch and say I love you. So, Pepe, what should we do today? Play cards, go for a walk, or maybe go fishing and tell a joke or two? Pepe, Pepe? Why won't you answer me? Why did you leave? You didn't even say goodbye, and I

didn't get to say I love you. Am I dreaming?

I'm not, am I? I see that little box there with your name on it. People are swarmed around; it is just like when a bride throws her bouquet. Standing still as if time had stopped. Tears so strong, almost like rain. Not a harsh rain, but almost silent. Each drop told a piece of your story. I can hear you as clear as a sunny day, trying to find some humor in all this. There you are in your small box of destiny. Such a small dwelling for such a big guy, your ego that is. Ha, ha, ha... See, Pepe, you're not the only one with a sense of humor. Just one of the seeds you have sown in me. Goodbye, Pep, till we meet again.

~Brandi T. LeBlanc

Only in Dreams

I hear her.
In my sleep she speaks.
Saying everything I wish she'd say when I'm awake.
But every day I face her,
With a quiet mouth, and a quiet mind.
How can I expect to live the dream
When I don't even know her name?

-Ben Bettez

Renaissance

The shell is cracking,
and pieces of pain
like part of a warm, snuggly comforter
extrude through the fissures.
Pain that you had locked away
for a long, long time.
But you took it out, now and again,
to worry at, like a cavity in a tooth.
After awhile, it became familiar,
scabbed over like a wound,
and seemed to belong
to some other person
in some other time.
But now, it's escaping,
to be replaced by who knows what...
 joy,
 fear,
 despair,
 or perhaps more pain--
the unknown kind,
that takes hold of you
and announces its presence at every turning.
You thought you had it under control,
foolish you! Don't you know
that no one lives in a vacuum?
Interrelationships
will eventually erode the layers away,
and you will be exposed.
And the shell does not allow itself
to be repaired.

~Jeanne Hue

